Revising for Exams

The Most Important Thing to Know

Most students cram for their exams during the revision weeks... and fail to remember the module information just one year later. If you want to remember the information you learn while at University, you must put it in your long-term memory. And long-term memory requires long-term revision. Proper exam revision begins at the start of the semester and not at the start of the revision weeks. The more times you can see and think about information, the more it will be grounded in your long-term memory. See the ‘Scheduling and Time Management’ guide for help on creating a semester-long revision schedule.

Other than revising for your exams from the start of the semester, here are a few other tips to help you do well on your exams:

Using Revision Week Effectively

Many students spend the revision weeks re-writing their lecture notes. This is both a passive and ineffective way of revising for an exam. Re-writing your notes does not help you memorise them.

Here are five highly-effective steps to revision:

Move from the big picture to the details and back to the big picture.

- At the start of revision weeks, spend 2-3 days looking at all of your notes for a particular module. You are not memorising the information at this point, but simply establishing a larger context for understanding the details.
- Then spend one week memorising the information details. You might memorise two lectures each day or two topics of information each day.
- Always leave the final two days before an exam to step back from the details and again see them in the larger context. Review again all of the notes for that module.
- This method is based on the idea that the more times you can see/hear/think about information, the more effectively you will have it in your long-term memory.

Pen and scratch paper

- Memorising information is not easy. There are no fast methods of memorising huge bodies of information.
- The most effective means of memorising information is to force yourself to re-write it from memory.
- With a pen and scratch paper, read the information in your lecture notes. Think about it. Make sure you comprehend it. Then cover that information and try to re-write it in your own words on scratch paper. When you have written everything you can remember on that particular section of notes, uncover the lecture notes and compare them with your re-written notes. Did you remember everything? What did you miss?
Repeat this process until you are able to re-write everything from memory on that section of notes. Then move to the next section of notes.

Remember to review those notes before finishing for the day. The more times you think about the information, the more it will be in your long-term memory.

Study away from the public eye

- The library has its purposes, but it is not the best place to study for exams.
- To memorise information effectively, you want to be able to talk out loud, stand up, move around, and gesture. When you write information, also speak it. When you read your notes, read them out loud. When assessing whether you have information memorised, pretend to teach the information to an invisible student. If you can teach information without notes, then you know the information.

Re-organise information

- You can be assured that you know and understand the information if you are able to reorganise it. If you normally take notes in an outline format, then try to reorganise the information into a mind-map or other construction. Think about which topics are related, even if only tangentially. Ask yourself, ‘How do lectures #4 and #14 relate to each other? What about #’s 3 and 9?’ Or, ‘How does topic “a” relate to topic “d”?’

Practice exams

- Find past exam papers online and use them as a study tool. Better yet, as a friend or classmate to create a mock exam question for you.
- Give yourself a mock exam. Time yourself. At the start of the time, read the mock question for the first time and spend the next 1.5-2 hours writing a mock exam on it.
- This is particularly helpful if you are prone to stress while sitting exams.

Pre-Exam Tips

Exam Preliminaries

- If you have any disabilities (or exceptional personal circumstances) that may affect your exam performance you should consult with student services.
- Deal with your stress early! Some symptoms of stress are: restlessness, sleeplessness, fatigue. Some stress is normal and enables performance.
- Visualise success – completing the exam and doing well.
- Find out what can be taken into the exam – the tools, e.g. calculators, dictionaries, water, etc.

The Night before the Exam

- Don’t spend the night before the exams trying to cram in more revision.
- Prepare your exam kit and what you will need to take in with you for the next day, e.g. pens (more than 1), pencils, erasers, rulers, calculators.
- Get a good night’s sleep.
On Exam Day
- Have breakfast / lunch (morning / afternoon exam)
- Take water with you (check if you are allowed this in to the exam)
- Arrive in plenty of time – read through summaries (briefly) – don’t engage in discussion about the topics with others, this may distract, confuse or make you more anxious.

During the Exam
- Keep an eye on the time
- Get an overview of the paper by scanning through it.
- Read the instructions VERY carefully, answer required questions, e.g. answer question 1 and any 3 others; answer 1 question from Section A and 2 from Section B.
- Calculate the time to be spent on each question relative to the mark. Pace yourself accordingly.
- Decide on the order you are going to answer the questions, starting with the questions you find easiest.
- Analyse the questions:
  - What exactly is the question asking?
  - What information is available?
  - How does it relate to the semester’s work?
  - Are any of the other questions similar?
  - Are there clues elsewhere in the paper?
- Jot down any formulae, notes for each question before starting to write the answers.
- For essay questions, do not begin writing the essay without first making a plan/outline. Take the first 10-15 minutes to write a detailed plan, ensuring you include the most important information and have a well-organised and logical essay.
- Make regular checks on the time and any calculations. If you run out of time – jot down point form responses – they may still be worth some marks.

The information contained in this leaflet has been adapted from ‘Exam Day Tips’, University of Melbourne and generated from personal experience.

Further Resources
You can also pick up a free Palgrave Pocket Study Skills Guide from the CAPOD offices.